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AUTHOR Wesson, Linda Hampton; Grady, Marilyn L.
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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the leadership qualities of rural and urban women superintendents. Telephone interviews with 51 randomly selected female superintendents in 29 states examined perceived sources of job satisfaction, the benefits accrued on the job, sense of self-fulfillment in the workplace, and personal strengths. The most frequent responses in relation to job satisfaction were making a difference, initiating change, providing direction, meeting children's needs, having control, and working with people. The most frequently mentioned benefits associated with being a superintendent were working with people, achieving a career goal, opportunity for growth, gaining skills, enjoying the job, enjoying a variety of work, and enjoying financial benefits. Two-thirds of respondents associated a great deal of self-fulfillment with being a superintendent. When asked to identify their strengths as superintendents, respondents noted skills in working with people, communication, and having a vision. Respondents indicated that when they were hired, their school boards had been seeking someone who could introduce and manage change or who could provide structure, stability, and organization to the district. The results indicate that the leadership characteristics of urban and rural women superintendents are similar, and that these leadership characteristics fit a new leadership paradigm stressing collaboration and consensus building. (LP)

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A Comparative Analysis of Women Superintendents in Rural and Urban Settings

Linda Hampton Wesson
Educational Administration
Arkansas State University
PO Box 2781
State University, AR 72467
(501) 972-3062

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Marilyn L. Grady
Educational Administration
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
1204 Seaton Hall
Lincoln, NE 68588
(402) 472-3726

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A Comparative Analysis of Women Superintendents in Rural and Urban Settings: A National Study

The prevailing model of educational administration evolved over the last part of the 19th and the early decades of the 20th centuries (Callahan, cited in Adkison, 1981). This leadership model paralleled the managerial revolution in business, industry, and government; it defined the professional manager as a person who had an "internal decision-making monopoly and authority over others" (Kanter, cited in Adkison, p. 313, 1981) and relied on a rigid hierarchical structure, competition, and control to bring about results (Ortiz & Marshall, 1988).

There are serious questions about the efficacy of this leadership model. As early as 1988, researchers in educational administration were asking two fundamental questions that highlighted this dilemma: "To what extent does a system of hierarchical control enhance teaching and learning? . . . To what extent do traditional ranking and emphasis on competition square with the enhancement of educators as people and of instructional services?" (Ortiz & Marshall, 1988, p. 138).

Two powerful movements in this country seem to have originated, at least in part, as reactions to this leadership model: one is the current reform movement in education with its emphasis on restructuring schools; the other is the paradigm shift in leadership that is characterized by collaboration and consensus building.

Reinventing or restructuring schools in this country began with the educational reform movement of the 1980s. It involves understanding the social, political, and legal context within which schools operate and redefining school programs and practices in ways that optimize student learning (Simpson, 1992). "The educational crisis today is not an isolated phenomenon but is part of the larger social, familial, and value crises that defy a simple solution, i.e., better schools" (Simpson, 1992, p. 238). Because of the complexity of the issues and the need for a systematic approach to the problems, the reform movement calls for educational leaders to move away from the traditional, hierarchical, control-and-command environment. In complex environments, leaders have to be more than technical managers.

The paradigm shift in leadership is depicted in business management literature (Aburdene & Naisbitt, 1992; Covey, 1990; Helgesen, 1990, Peters, 1988) as a shift toward a more flexible organizational structure based on units that are more lateral and cooperative. It is an

organizational structure that values leadership over management and emphasizes collaboration, consensus building, and empowerment.

There is a parallel movement toward the reconceptualization of leadership in educational administration. A key player in this movement is the superintendent of schools. Most studies have focused on the superintendency in general and the male superintendent in particular. Although 3% of the superintendencies are held by women, little is known about their leadership characteristics and work experiences (Bell, 1988). It is particularly important to gain a better understanding of women in the superintendency as educators reconceptualize the dimensions of educational leadership to better fit the demands of the reform movement in education (Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, & Lee, 1982; Marshall, Mitchell, & Wirt, 1989; Purkey & Smith, 1983).

To better understand the leadership characteristics of women superintendents this pilot study utilized a self-report procedure to determine whether women superintendents operationalize leadership qualities that fit a new paradigm of leadership and if there are differences in the leadership characteristics of urban and rural superintendents. The variables of interest were women's perceived sources of job satisfaction, the benefits accrued on the job, their sense of self fulfillment in the work place, and personal strengths they brought to the job.

We wanted to look for differences between the leadership characteristics of urban superintendents and rural superintendents because of the amount of stress urban districts have historically experienced (Cuban, 1979). In 1990 Samuel Husk, then the executive director of the Council of Great City Schools that represents forty-four of the countries largest urban districts, estimated that the average tenure of urban superintendents was less than three years (Bradley, 1990). Today sources at the Council of Great City Schools cite the average tenure of an urban superintendent as two years. Recent attention has also focused on difficulties facing urban school districts because of changing student and family demographics (Hodgkinson, 1988; Rist, 1992). Urban school districts have been and are systems under stress, and we wanted to know if women superintendents in urban districts differed from women in rural districts in regard to their perceived sources of job satisfaction, benefits accrued on the job, sense of self fulfillment, and personal strengths that they brought to the job.

Procedures

To obtain the information needed to answer the research questions addressed in this study, women superintendents were interviewed. We believed that interviewing women

superintendents would provide the depth of information required by the research questions. However, we could locate no comprehensive directory of women superintendents.

In seeking the names of women superintendents we solicited assistance from the American Association of School Administrators, state associations of school administrators, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), state departments of education, and other researchers. We received lists of superintendents' names from state departments of education and state administrators' groups. Some states would not release the names of their superintendents. Thus we were able to identify 346 women superintendents in 29 states and were unable to secure names of women superintendents in the other 21 states.

All 346 superintendents received a letter explaining the study and were asked two questions: Would you be willing to participate in the study; and, how many years have you been a superintendent? After one mailing 263 (76%) of the superintendents responded. Of the 263 respondents, 249 (95%) agreed to be interviewed.

Because our research questions required a comparison of the perceptions of urban and rural superintendents, we initially categorized each member of the superintendent sample as urban or rural. For this initial categorization, superintendents working in population centers of 50,000 or more or in an area adjacent to such a population center were classified as urban. All others were classified as rural superintendents.

All 31 superintendents initially identified as urban were selected for telephone interviews. We randomly selected 31 rural superintendents for interviews so that we could have an equivalent number of rural superintendents for comparison with the urban subjects.

In an effort to verify our definition of urban, we reviewed characteristics described in publications issued by the U.S. Department of Commerce (1990 Census of Populations, 1992), The World Almanac (Scripps Howard, 1990), and Grolier's Electronic Encyclopedia (1991). These sources suggested a number of complex descriptions of urban areas that did not enhance our ability to define urban superintendents. Thus, as part of the interview, we asked the superintendents to identify their superintendency in terms of settings. This procedure was compatible with suggestions made by Thomas (1991) for defining urban in educational studies.

Twenty-one urban and 30 rural superintendents were available for telephone interviews during January 1993. The superintendents answered 10 open-ended questions in sequence during interviews of 30-45 minutes in length.

Each researcher independently reviewed the transcripts of the interviews and identified major themes. The researchers compared their findings to verify accurate identification and naming of the themes. Independently, the researchers developed categories of themes. The researchers then compared the categories and developed the final analysis. The results are reported in the following section.

Findings

After a brief overview of the respondent demographics we offer the overall responses to the five interview thrusts; job satisfaction, job benefits, self-fulfillment, personal strengths, and perceptions of superintendent qualities sought by school boards.

Twenty-one urban and 30 rural superintendents were interviewed during January 1993. The urban superintendents had a range of experience from 6 months to 13 years with an average of 4.7 years. The rural superintendents had a range of experience between 6 months and 10 years with an average of 3.25 years.

The urban superintendents had a range of students in their school districts between 850 and 63,000 students with an average of 18,700 students. The rural superintendents had a range of 43 and 3,300 students in their districts with an average of 1,285 students.

Satisfaction

In response to a question concerning satisfaction with the role of superintendent, 81 satisfying aspects were cited by the 51 subjects. Of the 81 satisfying aspects 18 responses concerned making a difference. Comments included: making a difference with students, making a difference in the whole system, making a difference in student achievement, making a difference in children's education and progress, and making a difference in the future of education.

The second most frequently cited satisfying aspect found in 12 of 81 responses was being involved with change. Comments included: being part of a new climate of educational change, seeing positive changes you can make in students' lives and in the district itself, making changes that impact schools; being able to implement change, and working in a period of change is exciting.

The third most frequently cited satisfying aspect found in 6 of 81 responses was providing direction. Comments included: helping other people focus in a direction, getting direction for a school system, moving in a direction, and providing overall direction for a school district.

Four responses were related to the chance for growth available in the superintendency. Comments included: I have an opportunity to learn and grow myself. I experience a lot of personal growth from the job. I have a chance for growth especially in dealing with different kinds of people.

Four responses concerned job benefits that prepare the individual for other jobs. Comments included: I'm gaining skills that might prepare me for another job after I have 30 years in education. This job could lead to a position in higher education. business, or politics.

Three responses described job benefits as being related to the fun or pleasure of the role. Comments included: It's fun, it's a challenge, it's exciting. I find great pleasure in what I do. I am doing something that I like.

Three responses cited the variety of the job. Comments were: Every day is different. I like the variety. I enjoy the unique experience it provides.

Three responses noted the financial benefits of the superintendency. Comments included: I enjoy the higher pay and building my retirement with a higher salary. I find the financial benefits are satisfying.

Other responses given individually noted benefits such as challenge, feeling good when kids do well, giving something back, having a chance to inspire, mold, focus people on a vision for students, being a change agent, seeing the results of my labor, liking change, and satisfying a personal need to influence society.

Benefits

- Working with People
- Achieving a Career Goal
- Having a Chance for Growth
- Gaining Skills
- Enjoying the Job
- Enjoying Variety of Work
- Enjoying Financial Benefits

Self Fulfillment

The 51 subjects were asked how much self fulfillment the role of superintendent provided. Twenty-three responses described the superintendent's role as providing a great deal of self fulfillment. Comments included: There is a lot of self fulfillment and it is a validation of all the hard work that I have put into the preparation for this job. This job offers a lot more satisfaction than any job I have ever had. There is a great deal of self fulfillment, I would say a

Five of 81 responses noted meeting the needs of children as satisfying aspects of the superintendent's role. Comments included: molding a system that can better meet needs of kids, making the system better for kids, and having a role in student achievement.

Five of 81 responses concerned control or power as satisfying aspects of the superintendent's role. Comments included: having control over what's happening, and feeling I have the power to actually do something.

Five of 81 responses cited working with people as satisfying aspects of the job. Comments included: feeling good about working with staff, being able to work with people, and working with students and faculty.

Other responses included a broad range of satisfying aspects noted singly by individuals. Among these responses were the following: respect the position brings, working with the board to set policy, the variety of the job, the realization of a dream, the flexibility of the job and scheduling of time, providing leadership, seeing principals grow, overcoming obstacles, and helping to mold a system.

Job Satisfiers

- Making a Difference
- Making Change
- Providing Direction
- Meeting Children's Needs
- Having Control
- Working with People

Benefits

When asked what the benefits of the job of superintendent were, the 51 subjects noted 68 benefits. The benefit cited most often was the opportunity to work with a variety of people. Eight responses in this category included comments such as: I enjoy the opportunity to deal with a variety of interesting and talented people and that enriches my life. I like dealing with parents and teachers. I like the relationships that develop with people.

Six responses indicated that the benefit of the job was achieving a career goal or pinnacle. Comments included: This is my 29th year in education and this is a pinnacle to a career. I have achieved a career goal and it's been a struggle getting here. It's been a struggle getting here and achieving this goal. I have a sense of success with the job. This is the culmination of a career path.

tremendous amount. There is a great deal of self fulfillment, in fact, I love this job. This is a natural career fulfillment and I take a lot of pleasure in what I am doing. The job brings the highest self fulfillment. It is my dream come true. I get a great deal of self fulfillment. I love my job. This job can be rated a 10 in self fulfillment for me. I see myself as a life-long learner and this job helps me in that because I am always learning. There has also been a lot of self fulfillment in being able to go full circuit from classroom teacher to superintendent.

Four respondents indicated that there was little self fulfillment in the superintendency. Comments were: I don't think there is as much self fulfillment as when I was in the classroom. There is a lot of responsibility and tension in this job. On a scale of one to ten? Today one. This is not a satisfying job for me. I don't really like it; but, people like me need to do it. The satisfaction is not as much as I hoped. There's a lot of turmoil. There is not as much self fulfillment in this job because it has so much responsibility and you don't see the rewards of your work as much in this job as in others.

Other individual responses were more provisional in tone. Representative comments included: This job provides 100% career-wise fulfillment, 80% personal fulfillment, and 70% social fulfillment. It's too soon to talk about job fulfillment. This is the kind of job that'll bring you the amount of self fulfillment that you want to get out of it depending on what you are willing to put into it. The self fulfillment comes from my opportunities to use skills in building consensus. I see this job more as fulfillment of other's goals rather than my own personal goals. It depends on whether you're successful!

Self Fulfillment
51 Superintendents

	N	%
• A Great Deal	33	65
• Little	4	8
• Mixed	14	27

Strengths

When asked to identify their strengths as superintendents, the 51 respondents noted skills in working with people, communication, and having a vision. Eleven superintendents described working with people as their major strength. Representative comments were: I believe that my major strengths are working with people or getting along with others. My major strength is my people skills. I like public relations, meeting and talking with people. My major strength is my

ability to work with varied people - both certified and non-certified. I think I have very good people skills. My major strength is that I am people oriented. I am sensitive to the community and students.

Ten superintendents described their strengths in communication. Descriptive comments included: I have excellent communication skills, listening before I talk or write. My strengths are my communication skills. I learned the hard way, you have to be careful how you say it and what you do with what you know. The major strength that I have is good communication skills. I can listen, visit with parents, see things from the other point of view. My major strength is my ability to communicate. I really work at that with all levels of staff, and with the community groups and the parents.

Nine superintendents noted their strengths as identifying a vision. The following were illustrative comments: I have some areas I feel are my strengths. They are an ability to identify a vision and articulate it. My strength is my ability to see the whole picture and create a collective vision. I can keep the vision in focus and deal with the elements of the mission. I have a vision and can make things happen. I have clear vision and an ability to see innovative and creative ways to approach problems. I have a vision for this district and the ability to build relationships with others so that this vision can be actualized.

Other strengths noted by individual superintendents were: school finance, being able to put myself in everyone else's position, patience, being calm, being a problem solver, having the ability to take a risk. A sense of humor, years in the district, perseverance, experience and training, and conveying high expectations.

Strengths

- Working with People
- Communication Skills
- Identifying a Vision

Qualities Sought by Boards

The 51 superintendents were asked what qualities the school board was seeking when they were hired. The qualities mentioned most often by the respondents were: someone who could introduce and manage change or someone who could provide structure, stability, or organization for the district.

Representative comments concerning making change were: The board was looking for someone who could make the changes to make the system better. Another person said the board

wanted someone to introduce and manage change. The person who was in the district prior to me had been here sixteen years. The district needed to make some changes.

Another respondent said: The board was seeking a change agent with a lot of competence. I had been assistant superintendent for 8 years. I had lived in this town for 25 years and had a lot of support for the job.

Another said, the board was looking for someone who could make things happen. My predecessor had been superintendent for some 25 years and we were coasting along. The board wanted someone to see them through, someone to make a commitment to this district.

Another superintendent said: The board wanted me to be able to work well with people and lead the district through changes without upheaval. Another said: The district had gone down over the years and the board was looking for a change. Another respondent said: The board's chief concern was that they wanted change.

Eight respondents said that the board was looking for a superintendent who had organizational ability or could provide structure for the school district. Comments such as the following represent these qualities.

One superintendent said: The board was looking for someone who could provide structure. They wanted someone who had a backbone and was willing to do something and make a difference. Before I was hired, the superintendent had been letting things go by.

Another said: The board was looking for someone with strong administrative ability who could supervise teachers. They also wanted someone who was able to give a lot to the district.

Another superintendent said: The board was looking for a stabilizer and someone who had good relations with different groups. Another respondent said: The board wanted someone who would have a stabilizing influence on the district.

Four superintendents described financial expertise as the quality sought by boards. Three superintendents indicated that the board did not have a clear idea of the qualities they wanted in a superintendent. An illustrative comment was: The board didn't have a clue what they were looking for when they hired me.

Three individuals said the board was seeking leadership. The following were illustrative comments: The board wanted someone who could provide them with strong leadership. Another said the board was seeking someone to give leadership in the community.

Two superintendents said boards wanted someone in the system or known. One said: They wanted someone in the system since they make it a policy to promote from within. Another said: I have home-town roots that helped the school board feel that they could trust me. They wanted me to bring back the pride that the school had lost.

Another superintendent said: The school board was totally going out on a limb when they hired me. I was 32 years old when they hired me which made me the youngest female superintendent in the state and the first female superintendent in this community.

Another superintendent said the board sought someone to restore order. She said the district had a deficit with 9 RIFs and the superintendent walked. The district was in turmoil. They had a disaster and they wanted it fixed. Communication was a wreck. I feel they looked for someone to restore order and could get the budget balanced quick while getting back to the purpose of what school is really all about.

One superintendent said when the board was seeking a superintendent she felt that they were looking for someone who was able to communicate. The board wanted someone who would lead them in a bond issue.

One superintendent said that they weren't concerned that I hadn't had experience in finance. They wanted someone who was trustworthy and sincere. They thought character and sincerity were important. They were also looking for an instructional leader.

One superintendent said the board was looking for a person who was a healer and a visionary. They wanted someone who would listen and communicate. Before I was hired, an adversarial relationship had developed between the superintendent and the board.

Qualities Sought By Boards

- Someone who can introduce and manage change
- Someone who can provide stability, structure, and organization for a district.

Discussion

Differences in the leadership characteristics of urban superintendents and rural superintendents did not emerge from this investigation. We found no differences in these two groups for the four variables: job-satisfiers, benefits, self fulfillment, and strengths. This study does indicate that women superintendents in both urban and rural areas are defining their leadership roles in ways that are different from the command-and-control, hierarchical model. Aburdene and Naisbitt (1992) have indicated that women in corporate America lead in new and

different ways, ways which are non-hierarchical and emphasize collaboration and cooperation. As the women superintendents in this study talked about their job satisfiers, the benefits of the job, the self fulfillment the role provided, and their strengths as superintendents, they appear to be operationalizing the terminology found in the leadership research by Aburdene and Naisbitt.

Consider the following comments offered by women superintendents when they were asked to describe their job satisfiers and strengths. Although these are only sample answers, they are representative of many of the women interviewed. (The underlined descriptors are those used by Aburdene and Naisbitt to describe the characteristics of a leadership style that is non-hierarchical and more collaborative.)

"nourishing environment for growth"

> "My major strength is my ability to work with people so that we can move through restructuring and fulfill the obligations of new state mandates. I have been able to work with different people and build consensus."

"acts as role model"

> "My major strength is my people skills. I am viewed as an important person in the community, and I am very involved with the city. I spend a lot of time interpreting community needs to the school board and interpreting school needs to the community."

"wholistic"

> "My major strength is my ability to get facts from everyone that contributes to a problem."

"change"

> "My greatest strength is my ability to work with persons, deal with complex issues and come up with consensus."

"vision"

> "My major strength is that I have a vision and can make things happen."

"reaches out"

> "My major strength has been creating a good school climate in which the staff feels ownership in the school."

The fact that the school boards were looking for superintendents that fit the leadership descriptors of Aburdene and Naisbitt can be substantiated by the statements from the superintendents as they respond to the question: "What were the characteristics the school board

was looking for when they hired you?" (Again the Aburdene and Naisbitt descriptors are underlined.)

"nourishing environment for growth"

"This district had 5 superintendents in 7 years, so they were looking for someone who really cared about the school and community, someone who would help the board know what its role is, someone who is a good communicator. In the past the ego of the superintendents had gotten in the way of good management practices."

"acts as role model"

"The board wanted me to be able to work well with people and lead the district through changes without upheaval."

"wholistic"

"The board was seeking a change agent with a lot of competence. I had been assistant superintendent for 8 years and they saw how effective I had been in that job. They also wanted a communicator to keep the board informed. I had lived in this town for 25 years and had a lot of support for the job."

"change"

"The board was looking for someone who could make things happen. My predecessor had been superintendent for 25 years, and we were coasting along."

"vision"

"The board was seeking someone who could persuade the community that there was a need for change and also be able to work with the board in implementing and assessing these changes."

"asks the right questions"

"They wanted new answers to questions; they wanted someone to look at the broad picture and come up with new solutions."

"reaches out"

"The board was looking for women who would have community support and would spend time with and for the community."

Conclusion

This pilot study utilized a self-report procedure to determine whether women superintendents operationalize leadership qualities that fit a new paradigm of leadership and if there are differences in the leadership characteristics of urban and rural women superintendents. The variables of interest were women superintendents' perceived sources of job satisfaction, their

personal benefits accrued on the job, their sense of self-fulfillment in the work place, and the strengths they brought to the job.

The most striking conclusion is that both urban and rural women superintendents have leadership characteristics that are similar, and these leadership characteristics do fit a new leadership paradigm. These women superintendents have been hired to be change agents and consensus builders, and both the urban and rural superintendents are finding a lot of success in their jobs. Data gathered during the interviews indicate that both groups of superintendents describe their job satisfiers, job benefits, and strengths in terms that do indeed fit a new leadership paradigm.

Both groups of superintendents' job satisfiers centered around bringing about change ("making a difference," "being involved in change," and "providing direction"); both groups of superintendents saw the job benefits in terms of reaching out to others and creating a nourishing environment ("opportunity to work with a variety of people," "achieving a career goal," and "a chance for growth"); both groups of superintendents saw their strengths in terms of connectedness and vision ("working with people," "being able to communicate," and "having a vision").

The answers to the question, "What qualities was the board seeking when they hired you to your present position?" are indicators that most of the school boards were looking for the very qualities that these women saw as their strengths, their job satisfiers and the benefits they received from the job; namely, bringing about change - their strengths, creating a nourishing environment - their job satisfiers, and having a vision and connectedness with the district - their job benefits. The board wanted someone to introduce and manage change; they wanted someone to provide stability, structure, and organization for the district. These superintendents' leadership styles as indicated by their perceived strengths and job satisfiers seem to be an appropriate fit for school boards in both urban and rural school districts.

This was a pilot study of a small sample of the women superintendents in this country, but the results are consistent with the premise: women superintendents are successfully operationalizing leadership skills that fit a new leadership paradigm, a paradigm that values connectedness and human development (Shakeshaft, 1987). That these results are consistent for women in urban and rural areas is illustrated by a comment made by an urban superintendent who said, "The size of the district really doesn't matter; the larger districts draw a lot of attention

because of the size, but the issues are the same. These issues deal with adult problems--problems of who is going to control the agenda and issues concerning governance. These adult issues get in the way of the children's issues." Perhaps a leadership paradigm shift in the superintendency will help mitigate these kinds of agendas!

Note

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